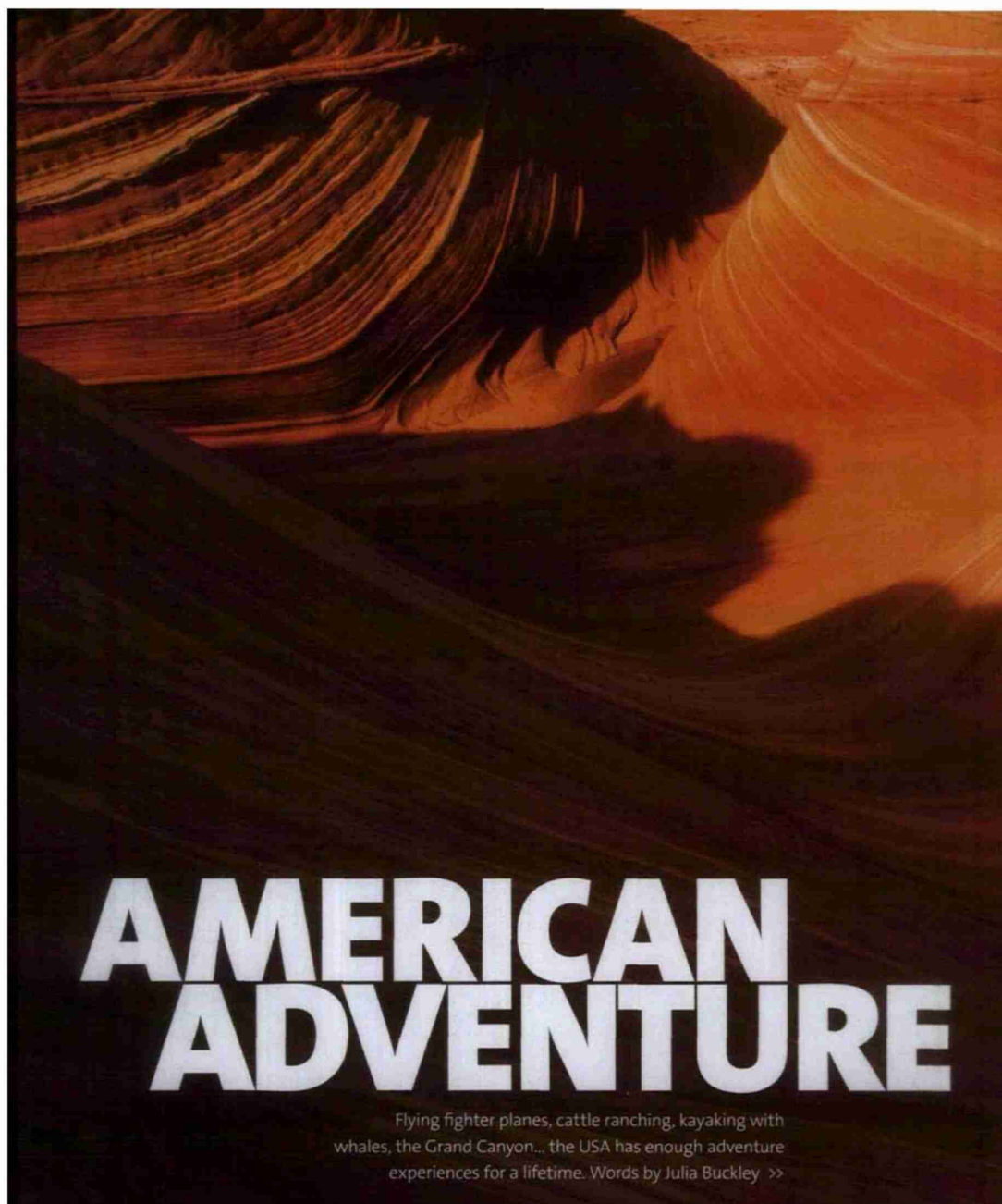


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**Date:** 02 May 2011  
**Page:** 114  
**Reach:** 80000  
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**UTAH**  
LIFE ELEVATED



# AMERICAN ADVENTURE

Flying fighter planes, cattle ranching, kayaking with  
whales, the Grand Canyon... the USA has enough adventure  
experiences for a lifetime. Words by Julia Buckley >>



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**Precise.**

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+44 (0) 20 7264 4700  
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[www.precise.co.uk](http://www.precise.co.uk)

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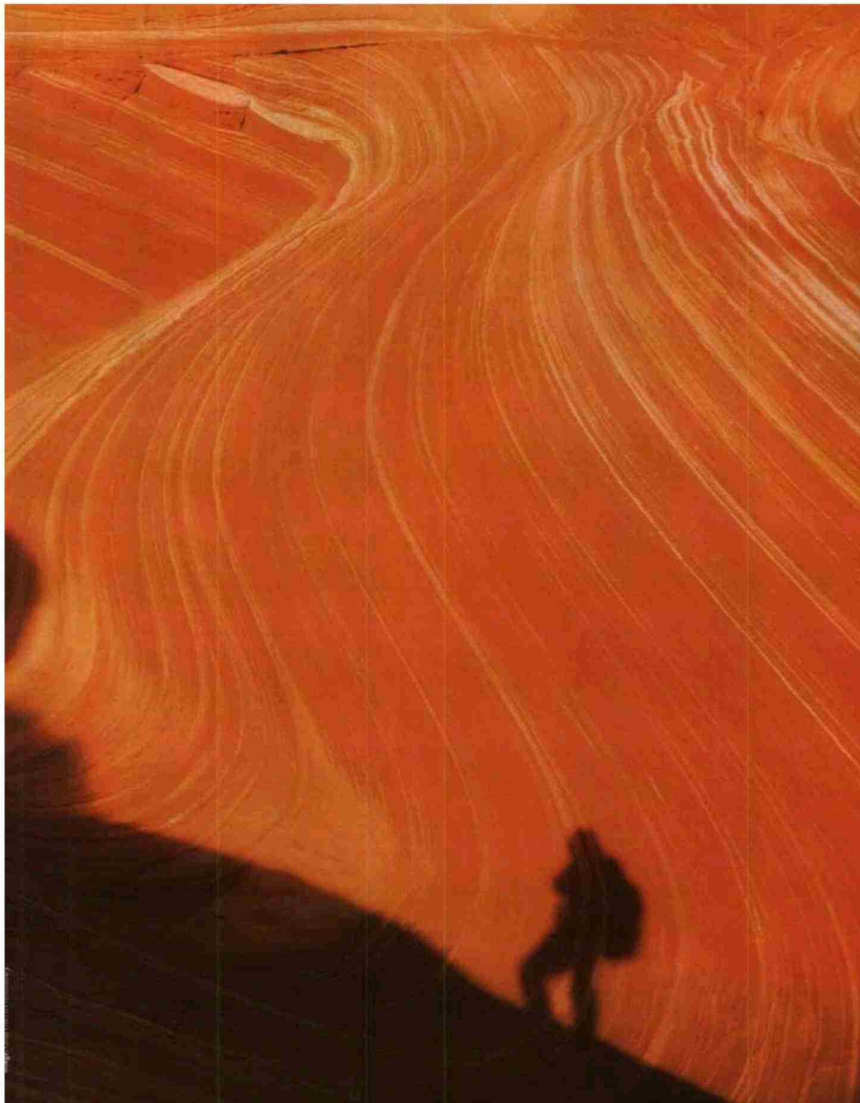


Image: Chad Ehlers/Photolibary

**WE ALL WANT TO BE DIFFERENT,  
DON'T WE?**  
WHATEVER WE'RE DOING,  
HOWEVER MANY PEOPLE  
WE'RE WITH,  
**EVERYONE WANTS THEIR  
OWN UNIQUE EXPERIENCE.**

**Previous page:**  
A solitary hiker casts  
their shadow on the  
Vermillion Cliffs



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**Date:** 02 May 2011  
**Page:** 114  
**Reach:** 80000  
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That's how I felt about the Grand Canyon. I'd visited on several occasions, rooting it into my subconscious a little more each time. I'd seen the South Rim, the most famous viewpoint, in all four seasons. I'd walked it, flown over it, even stepped out into it on the Skywalk at the West Rim. Every time it had looked different, changing in front of my eyes, the shadows cast by the clouds lending it a shape-shifting quality. But every time, I had shared it with hundreds of other people and like a possessive child, I wanted it to myself. Which is why I decided to visit the North Rim.

The North Rim is the headland that you barely notice as you stare down into the canyon from the South. As the crow flies it's only 10 miles away... but in a car, with the Colorado River cleaving the landscape in two? Make that 180 miles, which is why it sees only 10% of the canyon's visitors. It's also open only from May to October; at 8,000ft, it's snowed in for the rest of the year. I time my trip for the first week of October, hoping the crowds will be on the wane.

Driving from Las Vegas, the road whips me through the desert, up a mountain pass into Utah, then eastwards, through the glorious Zion National Park. At Kanab, I take a detour, driving to Page and doubling back on myself, because I've been told the route Alt 89 approach is the most spectacular.

The road cuts sheer through a cliff face and makes for a plateau, flanked by dirty red cliffs. I cross the Colorado River at the Navajo Bridge. The car clings to the side of the aptly named Vermillion Cliffs; the route dodges vast, skull-shaped boulders piled by the roadside and starts winding up to the Kaibab Plateau. It climbs so steeply — 3,000ft in minutes — that I see no fewer than three sunsets,

the light reappearing each time I go up another level.

It's pitch black by the time I reach the North Rim and the Milky Way is streaking over my room, a log cabin in the forest and part of the Grand Canyon Lodge. Next morning I see the land peeling away beneath us; I've been sleeping 20ft from the edge of the canyon.

I walk the quarter-mile trail from the lodge to Bright Angel Point, the main vantage point. It's more unnerving than the walkways of the South; the path widens and narrows, pitches upwards and down and flings itself round rocky outcrops until the land has all but fallen away beneath me and I'm standing on a fingertip of rock, condors circling above my head, cawing in disbelief at the scene before us. It's so perfect, so still, that I feel seeing any more can only spoil it.

I drive back to the main road through meadows, past forests of aspen yellowing among thick green spruces. The sky is a piercing blue; it seems inconceivable that in two weeks this road will be closed, the sun-splashed plateau smothered in snow.

Six weeks later, I find myself back at the South Rim with friends. As we're perched on the cliff side, jostling with tour groups, I look over at the North Rim. It looks pristine, empty and glowing with its white carpet. And I start counting the days until May.

■ **How to do it:** Las Vegas is about 250 miles from the canyon. BA Holidays ([www.baholidays.com](http://www.baholidays.com)) offers three nights in Las Vegas plus flights from £669. Double rooms at Grand Canyon Lodge ([www.foreverlodging.com](http://www.foreverlodging.com)) cost \$113 (£70). Car Hire 3000 ([www.carhire3000.com](http://www.carhire3000.com)) has three days' car rental from Las Vegas from £39. Helicopter transfers between the destinations are available and take 20 minutes. [www.visitlasvegas.com](http://www.visitlasvegas.com)

## **MOUNTAIN BIKING, MOAB, UTAH**

Surrounded on all sides by some of the US' most treasured National Parks, Moab is already an epicentre of adventure. But it's the world-class mountain bike trails that make even those who haven't travelled on two wheels since school reach for the Lycra. One of the most revered bike trails, Slickrock, is just outside the city — a 9.6-mile loop that shoots you over bulbous sandstone cliffs on to slopes as vertical as skateboard ramps, along knee-squeezing ledges and down rocks eroded into sharp flights of steps, with a backdrop of snow-capped mountains.

Not as famous but just as spectacular is the 13-mile Poison Spider Mesa Trail, which runs up, along and around the red mesa, taking you through woodland, along bluffs, up rock faces and along cliff edges, with the Colorado River looping the mesa 200ft below (that's when it's time to dismount). Towards the end, it merges with the Portal Trail, which after it's inched its way round the clifftop, plunges 1,000ft in a mile's ride. And yes, there are evil arachnids in these hills.

But although there are dozens of trails around Moab itself, don't neglect the National Parks. The 100-mile White Rim Road requires up to four days, but circles the whole of Canyonlands National Park, skirting bell-like mesas, following dirt tracks, passing cliffs etched with Native American petroglyphs and slipping along canyon edges. On two wheels, you'll feel like you have the National Park to yourself.

■ **How to do it:** A 10-night self-drive tour from San Francisco, taking in Moab, the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas with Kuoni costs from £1,315. Includes flights and motorhome rental. British Airways flies from Heathrow to San Francisco. [www.kuoni.co.uk](http://www.kuoni.co.uk) [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com) >>





Client: Utah  
 Source: National Geographic Traveller (UK) (Main)  
 Date: 02 May 2011  
 Page: 114  
 Reach: 80000  
 Size: 4915cm2  
 Value: 49887.25

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#### **CATTLE RANCHING, GRAHAM, TEXAS**

Herding cattle, cantering through pasture, an evening at the rodeo — you don't get more all-American than a ranching holiday. And Wildcatter Ranch, 90 miles north-west of Dallas, has all the hallmarks of a quintessential homestead, from its herd of Angus cattle to its Stetson-clad cowboys.

Guides lead beginner-friendly trail rides daily, but more experienced riders will want a three-hour private excursion with one of the cowboys. Where you go is entirely up to you. Take your pick from more than 1,500 acres, ranging from pasture to rolling hills; forests of cedar, mesquite and live oak; and the Brazos River — the longest in Texas — which borders the property.

Guests can get as hands-on as they like, from hopping on a tractor-driven wagon and visiting the ranch's 10 Texas Longhorn cattle to riding out to the Angus herds and assisting the cowboys with anything from repairing fences and taking part in the annual branding to driving the cattle and rescuing lost calves (autumn is calving season).

This is rodeo country and the nearest town, Graham, hosts bull roping and rodeos year-round in its arena. While safety concerns mean you won't get a chance to try it live, the ranch lays on lessons on a mechanical bull.

But not all the activities are of the 'yeehaw' variety. You can go canoeing in a creek filled by the Brazos River, take a sunset ride in a horse-drawn wagon or hunt for fossils, pottery and arrowheads — the ranch is on the site of an ancient Native American reservation.

■ **How to do it:** A six-night holiday at Wildcatter Ranch, including flights, accommodation and two hours' riding per day, costs £2,090 per person with Ranch Rider. [www.ranchrider.com](http://www.ranchrider.com). >>

#### **KAYAKING WITH WHALES, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA**

If you thought whale watching was one of the ultimate ways of getting back to nature, then how about ditching the boat and doing it from a kayak? The marine reserve at La Jolla Cove has glassy calm waters and resident sea lions, and during the whale migration season (December to March), you can kayak right out into the Pacific to share the ocean with grey whales as they make their 2,800-mile journey from the Bering Sea to Mexico.

The migration route lies about two miles off the coast and during the paddle out to sea, you'll be entertained by cormorants and pelicans swooping overhead, sea lions as playful as puppies splashing in the water around you and prehistoric sunfish swimming through the kelp forests beneath. It's not too strenuous, either. It takes about 40 minutes to get there and you'll drift on the open ocean for about an hour before heading back. Besides, once you've watched a pod of 10 grey whales (which can reach up to 40ft in length) breach, spout and tear up the ocean just feet from you, you'll forget the muscle burn.

Whale sightings can't be guaranteed, but at the very least you will still very likely see pods of dolphins, shoals of fish and seals. It's one of the most laid-back ways to see the Pacific.

■ **How to do it:** Flights to San Diego and three nights' accommodation are offered by BA Holidays ([www.baholidays.com](http://www.baholidays.com)) from £579 per person, with direct flights beginning on 1 June. Hike Bike Kayak ([www.hikebikekayak.com](http://www.hikebikekayak.com)) and OEX Dive Center ([www.oexcalifornia.com](http://www.oexcalifornia.com)) offer whale watching tours from £34 (\$55) and £37 (\$60) respectively.

#### **ROCK CLIMBING IN RED ROCK NATIONAL PARK,**

#### **LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**

The Vegas Strip may be as far away from nature as you can get, but just 15 miles west, in the middle of the desert, is one of the best places in the States for rock climbing. Red Rock National Park is relatively small — the scenic drive is just a 13-mile loop — yet it encompasses Joshua tree-studded desert, limestone bluffs, fiery red sandstone cliffs and a designated wilderness area of four-sided canyons to explore.

The entire park is open to climbers, with more than 3,000 marked-out routes and a bouldering area, although its two

sides are very different. The more visually spectacular is the north side, home to the Calico Hills — a mass of red sandstone, undulating like toothpaste squeezed from a tube. In fact, they are petrified prehistoric sand dunes. The Hills are best for sport climbing, with routes varying from 30-180ft and gullies running up between the rocks, allowing you to start as far up as you like.

Climbing the traditional routes of the side canyons, though, is as rewarding. You'll hike a couple of miles through the canyon floor, into the wilderness area, before reaching the cliff face and the higher you go the more you'll see. If you can make it to the top of Mt Wilson at 7,070ft, you'll get spectacular views from the canyon stretching down to the Las Vegas Strip. Time it around sunset and you'll see the neon lights spark up against the lurid pink sky. Just make sure you're confident enough to get back down again in the dark. Backcountry camping is allowed in some parts of the park.

■ **How to do it:** Virgin Holidays ([www.virginholidays.co.uk](http://www.virginholidays.co.uk)) has flights and three nights' accommodation from £585 per person. Red Rock Climbing Center ([www.redrockclimbingcenter.com](http://www.redrockclimbingcenter.com)) offers private guided climbs in the Calico



**Client:** Utah  
**Source:** National Geographic Traveller (UK) (Main)  
**Date:** 02 May 2011  
**Page:** 114  
**Reach:** 80000  
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Hills from \$125 (£77) for half a day, while Jackson Hole Mountain Guides ([www.jhmg.com](http://www.jhmg.com)) climb the side canyons from \$235 (£145) per person per day. >>

## LEARN RATCHET ROLLS INSIDE LOOPS AND INVERTED SPINS AND FLY UPSIDE DOWN PAUSING IN MID-AIR TO LOOP THE LOOP OVER THE DESERT LANDSCAPE

### FLYING FIGHTER PLANES, PHOENIX, ARIZONA

The huge Sonoran Desert is impressive enough from the ground, alternating between flat scrubland and mountain and filled with cartoon-shaped saguaro cacti, but from 30,000ft up and upside down, it takes on an exhilarating new dimension. Fighter Combat International, based outside Phoenix, is where extreme adrenalin junkies go to play out their *Top Gun* fantasies — even those with no previous experience.

The company offers both air combat and aerobatics sessions in dual control aircraft. The air combat programme pits you against another plane and engages you in fighter moves, complete with fake gunfire when you pull the trigger and smoke machines signalling 'hits'.

Or try the 45-minute aerobatic Super Ride, where you'll learn ratchet rolls, inside loops and inverted spins, and fly upside down, pausing in mid-air to loop the loop over the desert landscape.

■ **How to do it:** Flights to Phoenix and seven nights at the four-star Wyndham Phoenix with Ebookers ([www.ebookers.com](http://www.ebookers.com)) costs from £644. Fighter Combat ([www.fightercombat.com](http://www.fightercombat.com)) charges \$795

(£490) for a half-day air combat session; from \$495 (£300) for aerobatics classes.

### RAFTING THE DELAWARE WATER GAP, PENNSYLVANIA

When New Yorkers feel the need for a blast of nature, they head 70 miles west to the Delaware Water Gap. Here, the Delaware River cuts through a ridge of the Appalachians, forming the border between New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

The mountainsides are beautifully cloaked with oak, hemlock and sycamore forests, but most people go for watersports rather than trekking. You can fish in the river, kayak, canoe, tube or raft (although the water is calm here, so don't expect whitewater rafting).

This is more Huckleberry Finn than action man — you'll be travelling at around 3mph — but the leisurely pace means there's plenty of time to scope out the deer, chipmunks and raccoons living on the banks, and eagles and hawks soaring above you. Visit in the autumn, when the forest is ablaze with reddening foliage, and even 3mph seems too fast to get a handle on its beauty.

■ **How to do it:** Flights to New York and three nights at the Hudson Hotel with Expedia ([www.expedia.co.uk](http://www.expedia.co.uk)) costs from £450. A day's car hire costs from £33. Raft hire costs \$42 (£26) per person per day with Adventure Sports. [www.adventuresport.com](http://www.adventuresport.com)

### KITEBOARDING ON SANIBEL ISLAND, FLORIDA

It's hard enough to drag yourself off the white sand beaches of Sanibel, the shrimp-shaped island in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Fort Myers, but if the crystal clear waters and shell-lined ocean floor don't do it for you, perhaps this will: the lighthouse area on the eastern tip of the island has almost perfect conditions for kiteboarding.

In the shadow of the two-mile causeway to the mainland, winds are relatively strong, which means that you can reach heights of up to 20ft and race from 0-50mph in just two seconds. From the air, you'll take in the gleaming white shore. You might even share the water with the dolphins for which the island is famous — J.N. Darling National Wildlife Refuge is on the north coast of Sanibel.

Be aware that since the conditions are conducive to speed, this isn't the place for beginners. You'll either need some riding experience or some quick lessons.

■ **How to do it:** Seven-nights from £994 staying at the Pink Shell Resort, Fort Myers including flights with Thomson ([www.thomson.co.uk](http://www.thomson.co.uk)). Three hours' kiteboarding instruction costs from \$300 (£185), including equipment rental, with Ace Performer. [www.aceperformer.com](http://www.aceperformer.com)





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**Page:** 114  
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## essentials AMERICA

### GETTING THERE

» There's plenty of choice if you're flying to a hub airport such as Los Angeles, New York or even Las Vegas. British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) and Virgin Atlantic ([www.virgin-atlantic.com](http://www.virgin-atlantic.com)) both fly direct to all three. Other airlines serving the USA from the UK include American Airlines ([www.americanairlines.co.uk](http://www.americanairlines.co.uk)), Continental ([www.continental.com](http://www.continental.com)), Delta ([www.delta.com](http://www.delta.com)), United ([www.unitedairlines.co.uk](http://www.unitedairlines.co.uk)) and US Airways ([www.usairways.com](http://www.usairways.com)).  
» **Average flight time:** 6h30m to the east coast; 9h45m to the west coast.

### GETTING AROUND

» Public transport in the States is practically non-existent, so you'll need to hire a car. The good news is that, as there are so many rental options, prices are low — from around £15 a day. Carhire3000.com offers among the lowest rates and it's cheaper to book through them than direct through rental companies in the US. One-way rentals cost a lot less by booking them in the UK, but expect to pay a minimum of \$100 (£60) to drop off the car at a different location.  
» The Grand Canyon's North Rim is best accessed from Las Vegas, 270 miles to the south-west. There's no public transport to speak of, so hire a car — it takes about five hours by the quickest route, six via Zion National Park and seven and a half if you take the longest, scenic route via Page and the Navajo Bridge.  
» If you want to take a tour from Las Vegas, operators run day trips to the North Rim. Las Vegas Grand Canyon Tours, for example, offers a flight and ATV tour from \$301 (£185). However, the best deals can be found by bargaining once on the ground in Vegas — book at least three days ahead, because tours fill up.

### WHEN TO GO

» Spring and autumn are generally the best times to go. Much of America can be unbearably hot in high summer, with temperatures in the high 30s and upwards. What's more, the East Coast can be very humid.  
» Winter can be a great time to visit — especially the National Parks, as they're pretty empty at that time of year and hotel rates are at rock bottom. Winter's a great time to visit Florida, with humidity at a minimum but temperatures warm.  
» The North Rim of the Grand Canyon is usually open from mid-May until the second half of October (in 2010 it closed in the last week of October). While high summer is uncomfortably hot, October is a beautiful time to visit, as the fall colours start appearing and tourist numbers level off. Book accommodation well in advance, though. The South and West rims remain open all year round.

### NEED TO KNOW

» **Visas:** UK citizens travelling for less than 90 days operate under the visa waiver program for the United States, but you will need to apply for security clearance in advance, via an ESTA (Electronic System for Travel Authorization) form, which costs \$14 (£8.60). Apply at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta>

» **Currency:** Dollar (\$). £1 = \$1.62.

» **Health:** No special vaccinations are required, although you should be up-to-date on routine immunisations.

» **International dial code:** 00 1.

» **Time difference:** Four time zones: GMT -5 includes Florida and Washington. GMT -6 includes New Orleans, Chicago and Dallas. GMT -7 includes Phoenix and Utah. GMT -8 includes Las Vegas and San Diego.

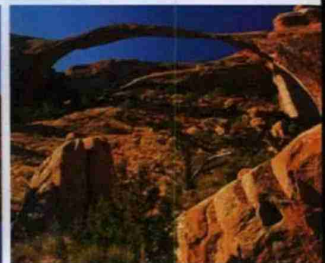
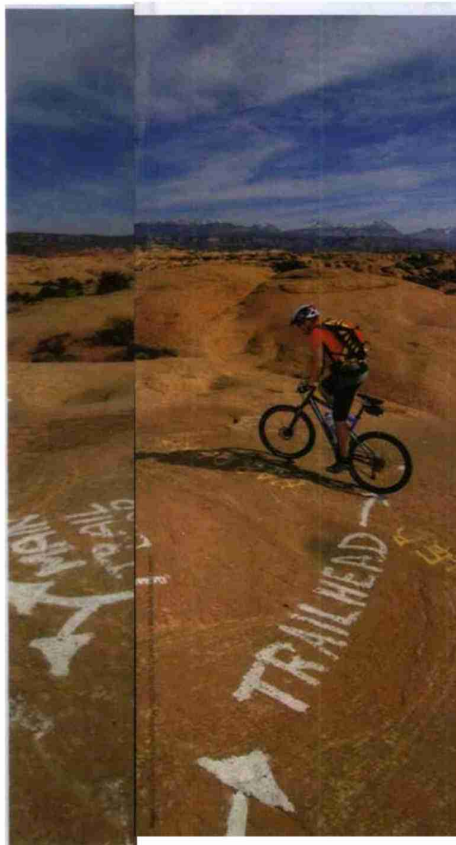
### MORE INFO

» The official tourism website for the United States is [www.discoveramerica.com](http://www.discoveramerica.com). The best overall guidebook to the States is the *Rough Guide to the USA* (RRP: £11.89), but it's also worth reading the *Insight Guide to US National Parks West* (RRP: £16.99) and *Lonely Planet's Arizona, New Mexico & the Grand Canyon Trips* (RRP: £19.99).  
» Online, check out the National Parks Service. [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov) □



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Date: 02 May 2011  
Page: 114  
Reach: 80000  
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**From left:** Mountain biker on the Slickrock Trail, Moab; Mountain bike shop, Poison Spider Mesa Trail; The world's longest natural rock span, Arches National Park

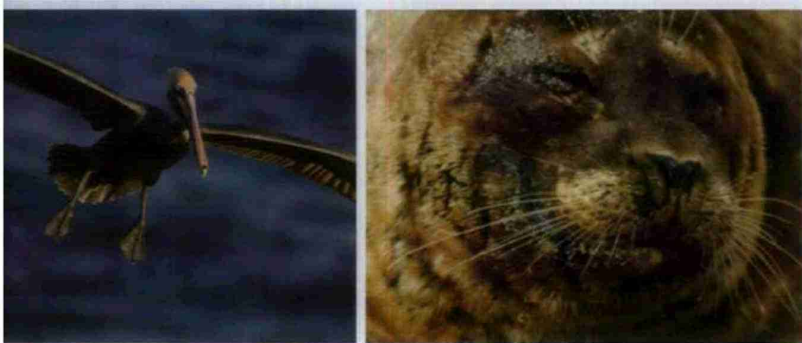
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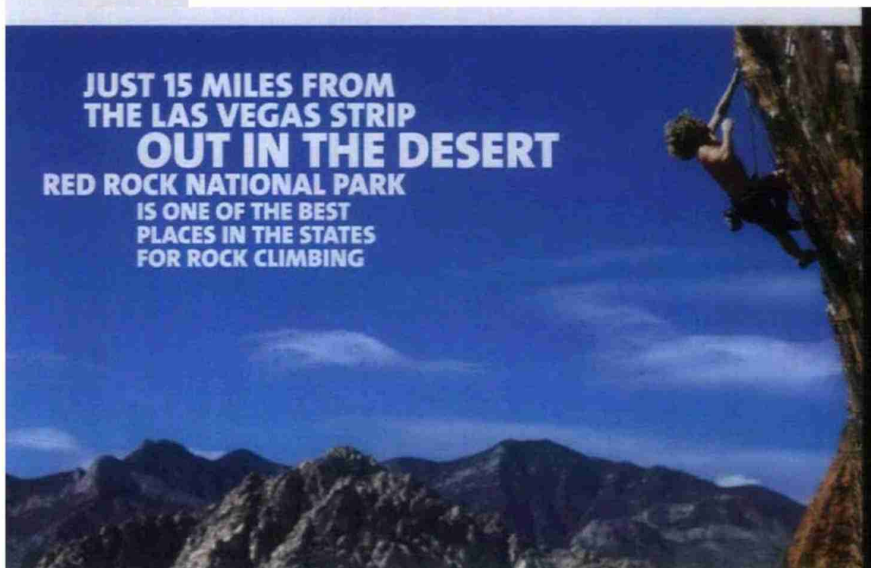
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**Below:** Brown pelican in breeding plumage and harbor seal, both at La Jolla, California



**Above:** Rock climbing in the Calico Hills, Red Rock National Park





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Page: 114  
Reach: 80000  
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### HIKING THE OLYMPIC PENINSULA, WASHINGTON STATE

For a back to basics, week-long hike with black bears, flying squirrels and maybe the odd Bigfoot as your only company, head to the Olympic peninsula, west of Seattle in Washington state. This is the ultimate remote expedition, with 95% of the area a designated wilderness and much yet to be explored.

The 52-mile Press Expedition Trail runs from Port Angeles to Lake Quinalt, home to one of three temperate rainforests on the peninsula. The week-long hike takes you up and down as you follow the Elwha and Quinalt rivers

across canyons, around lakes and through forests of ancient cedars and Douglas firs to its finish among the spectacular, moss-drenched rainforest.

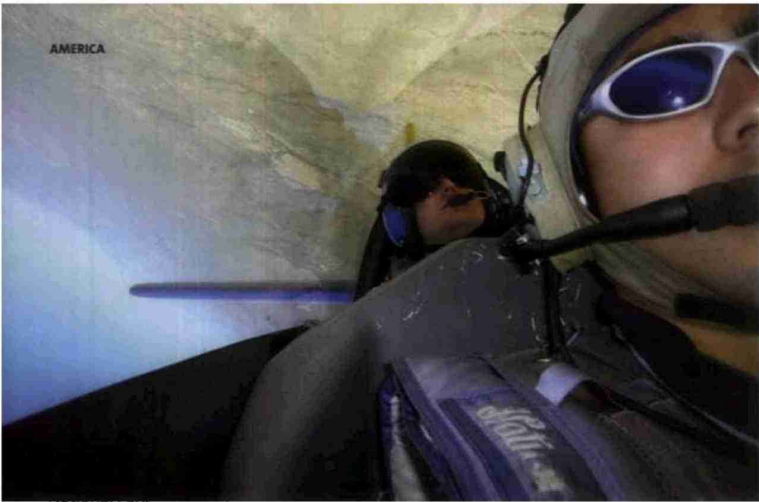
It's extremely remote; there are only two ranger stations along the route and you'll see more elk than hikers, even in summer. But it's less gruelling than you might expect, since the trail winds round the base of the mountains, with just one steep, two-mile climb towards the end of the journey. Keep your eyes peeled — the Olympic rainforest is ground zero for the Sasquatch, or Bigfoot, legend.

**How to do it:** Seattle, 85 miles from Port Angeles, is reached by United Airlines ([www.unitedairlines.co.uk](http://www.unitedairlines.co.uk)), with fares from £497. From there, Carrentals.co.uk offers a week's car hire from £133. ➔

**Previous pages:** Hall of Mosses Trail with bigleaf maples, Hoh Rain Forest, Olympic National Park

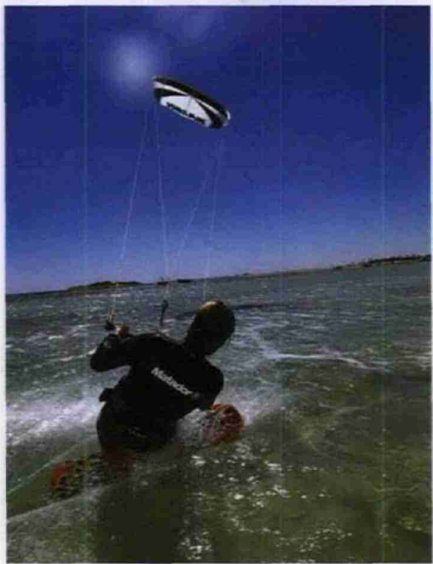


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Left: Flying a fighter plane in Arizona

Images: [www.fightercombat.com](http://www.fightercombat.com); Norbert Eisele Hein/Photolibrary



Above: Kiteboarding